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ABSTRACT

School teaching is becoming essentially and not merely marginally a genre of political behavior. For most contemporary teachers, most of the time, work consists of interpreting diverse ideological pressures, and attempting to appease those who produce these pressures in a manner that will allow them to retain their positions, self respect, and a modicum of satisfaction. Teacher educators are advised to acknowledge the growing significance of political factors in the occupation. Both coursework and clinical experiences need to be reevaluated and organized so as to explicitly communicate to novices the ramifications of political factors in their work and the implications for their careers. (Author/JD)

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"The Micropolitics of Teaching"

by

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Introduction

All occupations have political components. Their extent and intensity vary from one occupation to another depending upon such factors as: extent of agreement among personnel and others about legitimate occupational ends and means; organizational complexity; educational level and professional orientation of workers; stability of the workforce in terms of gender, ethnic, social class ratios; and degree of competition among members for perceived advantages. Teaching is no exception. School teaching is becoming <u>essentially</u> and not merely marginally a genre of political behavior (1). In addition to highly publicized organized confrontationist activity, teaching in the United States involves less well understood <u>day-to-day</u> strategic decision-making, bargaining, and impression-management by individual faculty members pursuing their interests interactively with administrators, parents, and increasingly with students.

School teaching is no longer best viewed as a simple, straight-forward enterprise in which a quasi-holy adult altruistically seeks to induce members of the younger generation to learn what seems philosophically tenable by means of skillful application of appropriate psychological principles. Would that it were so simple and straightforward; alas, it is not! Indeed,

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for most contemporary teachers most of the time, their work consists of interpreting diverse ideological pressures, and attempting to appease those who produce these pressures in a manner calculated to allow them to retain their positions, their self-respect, and a modicum of satisfaction. Again, such a state of affairs may not be praiseworthy as an ideal, but it happens to be the way things <u>really</u> are. We must admit this if we are honest. Perhaps it was never any other way, but educational historians are in a better position than I am to make such a judgment. This discussion deals chiefly with the present.

To say that teaching is in process of becoming a highly politicized occupation is not, however, to say that teachers are everywhere and at all times outspoken or even conscious about their political behavior as critics claim in view of the comparatively recent growth of organized, open confrontationist teacher militancy.

Most of the politics of education is still a politics of low visibility--some go further and label it an "invisible" politics, although they do not always suspect that teachers as well as other higher ranking school people are involved in such activities. In short, the politics of teaching remains a politics of seeming consensus (2), particularly where the day-to-day work of individual teachers in their local schools and classrooms is concerned.

This is due primarily to a deeply-entrenched occupational ethos which maintains in a quite literal sense that teachers are ideally servants of the community and its leadership agents.

In this view, they properly owe a peculiar allegiance to their superordinates (3), which translates normatively into occupational behavior of an "integrative" nature. The ethos further decodes into a belief that it is ethically correct for teachers at all times to accomodate their various individual and group roles to the will of their well-intended superiors in the occupational hierarchy. Such accomodation is explained as being in the interests of the welfare of the youngsters they are to serve. To express idiosyncratic tendencies in nonconformity with the morally redoubtable collective will as interpreted by the community's democratically elected and appointed representatives on boards of education and in administration is still viewed commonly by the public, school officials, and teachers themselves as somewhat alienated behavior. Such behavior is to be condemned as anti-social and ethically untenable. In teaching, as practically nowhere else even today, "ruggedly individualistic" thinking and behaving are swallowed up and conveniently forgotten in the interests of collective harmony. This, of course, is a severe contradiction which has not been resolved by ideologically conservative elements in the United States. They are fond of speaking and writing in broad, abstract terms about the notions of legitimate dissent embodied in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, but have not been generous in applying these notions concretely to the work of public employees, including teachers (4).

As a result of such an ethos, then, when we speak of a consensus politics of teaching as still dominating the occupation, we are referring to a reality which is difficult for many even at this late date to accept, because they have been successfully enculturated into believing that there is no such thing as a politics of teaching in the first place. To the average person, including many teachers, teaching is a distinctly non-political enterprise in which all participants are, at all costs, to work in orchestrated harmony with superior directive for the welfare of society and its progeny.

Because teachers' thoughts and actions are in conflict with each other, many of those who sincerely believe in the myth of integrative harmony have actually been behaving "schizophrenically." They have been responding simultaneously to the ethos of consensus as well as to a conflicting set of values equally influential throughout Western history and especially since the onset of the Industrial period, a pragmatic-utilitarian ethos incorporating the ideals of personal welfare, occupational advancement, professional autonomy, cultural progress through forceful activism and related "dissensual" elements (5). While pressured from all sides to believe that non-accomodative occupational behavior was illegitimate for teachers as a caste, these same teachers have frequently been impelled to behave in ways which directly contradict the illusion. Their motive has been to insure that their real personal and socio-moral imperatives will be fulfilled, both in the name of self-interest as well as that of genuine professional service to the young

growing up in an increasingly unstable social order. To their consternation and guilt, they frequently must operate in a manipulative, covert manner. Despite vast change in the rest of modern society, the occupation--in its relative isolation from other segments of socio-institutional life and restrained by a tightening bureaucratic organizational harness--has evolved relatively few norms for unofficially contravening more officially sanctioned integrative norms. Nonetheless, there has gradually developed over time a pervasive realization on the covert level that the integrative ethos cannot be perfectly sustained, a realization which in practice increasingly permits individual teachers to breach it in minor matters while their significant others "overlook" such breaches. (On the overt level, organized teachers no longer even bother pretending to practice what is being preached and, indeed, their superordinates in management no longer feel comfortable in preaching to them.)

Such covert everyday informal political activity on the job by individual teachers may be termed the "micropolitics" of teaching in order to distinguish it from the highly organized and somewhat more visible efforts of teacher militants through concerted action in confrontations pitting teacher organizations like the NEA or the AFT against boards of education and top-ranking school administrators. The latter, which has been far more extensively and intensively studied by political scientists, political sociologists, and educators than the former, may be termed the "macropolitics" of teaching. The present article is

concerned with the former, the underlying presumption being that those who wish to prepare teachers most efficaciously need to look at contemporary teaching behavior not solely as they wish it might become, but as it now, in fact, largely is; i.e., as a series of individual political acts on the parts of teachers competing in the occupational marketplace for jobs, for tenure and promotion, and, indeed, for effectiveness as student mentors.

Initiation Into the Political Realities of Teaching

The micropolitics of teaching viewed as a process ordinarily begin with the first courses in teacher preparation programs and, as part of that preparation, find their greatest expression during that clinical phase commonly called student teaching. Few education professors who work with student teachers tell their supervisees that success in the experience may, to a considerable extent, be dependent upon political wisdom and skill [if any explicit guidance in relation to the politics of teaching is given, it tends to be offered in the introductory foundational coursework--normally in a brief unit on professional organizations] (6). There are basically two reasons for this lack of candor: (a) most supervisors themselves are products par excellence of the prevailing occupational culture and thus unable to see or admit its weaknesses; (b) reflecting the overdone cultural platitude about being "critically constructive," college and university supervisors often consider it bad form to dwell on the "negative" aspects of the job of teaching. As a result, student teachers are usually

forced to learn the facts of occupational life on their own from their peers "in the know," from trial and error, from friendly cooperating teachers willing to confide in them, from college student teacher guidebooks which talk carefully about "appropriate" dress and behavior, and from evaluation forms which list required "competencies" for student teachers. The lucky ones do by these informal means pick up enough political savvy to survive their apprenticeship and land a teaching job.

However, if a student teacher is not getting along as well as expected within the locally prevailing normative system, the supervisor will often call him or her in for a conference. At this time, he or she will be carefully informed about appropriate and inappropriate strategies and tactics for success on the job. Nine times out of ten, this comes down to subtle guidance in artful relations with cooperating teachers, pupils, parents, and administrators rather than in matters of purely instructional procedure as conventionally understood. Perhaps the single most frequent source of difficulty in student teaching is due to a failure to please one's cooperating teachers. The primary task of the university supervisor caught in such a dilemma is political counseling. Because this vital concern has been so sorely neglected to date, I will illustrate what I mean by political intervention at some length. Most of what follows is drawn from an actual case of reverse gender discrimination known to the author, occurring in 1977. Several others could just as easily have been cited for illustrative purposes; e.g.,

cases dealing with appearance, ethnicity, personality conflicts, ideological differences, and more.

Mrs. X is an unemancipated kindergarten teacher who has always taken for granted the widely held cultural assumption that young children should be taught by women because they are "more sensitive to their needs" and "their parents would not approve of a male teacher." John L. is an idealistic twenty year old male who wants to teach kindergarten. He is initially advised against so doing by his university supervisor, but only feebly, in these affirmative action days of officially sanctioned changing gender norms and workforce composition, Mrs. X is asked to work with him for the student teaching semester, despite her reservations. She reluctantly agrees to, although she doesn't "know why any man would want to teach little children." At first, she attempts to hide her negative feelings about her new student teacher. Nonetheless, about a week after Mr. John L. has been placed, the school principal, having been subjected to Mrs. X's anxieties at length, casually converses with the university supervisor, suggesting offhandedly that John really belongs with a sixth grade class where his "masculine logic and strength" would "not be wasted." The experienced supervisor, sensing the ramifications of the situation but also cognizant of changing societal and institutional norms, tells John cautiously that he "might consider" transferring to an upper grade where apparently more men are needed. John--politically naive and strongly altruistic--refuses, and goes back to the kindergarten next day. The matter appears to be settled. However, it is not. For the

next few weeks, Mrs. X regularly hints at her displeasure with John. He is "clumsy"; he is too "harsh" in his discipline, etc. She can find little to fault in his "teaching," however. One afternoon, John walks into the supervisor's office at the university with a glum face. Somehow, he reveals, Mrs. X disapproves of his work, but he can't put his finger on the reason and she won't come out and admit to being dissatisfied with him. At last the supervisor has an opening to explain the situation candidly and in detail. Afterwards, John thanks the supervisor profusely.

The next week finds John "substituting" for a sixth grade class whose regular teacher is on an outdoor school trip. The principal is effervescent; Mrs. X is exuberant. After the week is over, John settles into a routine of working with kindergarten children in the mornings and sixth graders in the afternoons. Mrs. X seems to have become resigned to this modified arrangement. She gradually opens up more and more to the supervisor. Finally, she admits that John is a superior student teacher but that because she cannot visualize men working with young children, she will have to say so on her personal evaluation report to the college placement office. She agrees that he deserves an "A" for student teaching, however. The supervisor also has the sixth grade afternoon teacher fill out a report saying that John is an excellent teacher of older children.

The supervisor then advises John to capitalize upon his "flexibility" in an upcoming job interview. John does what the supervisor suggests, telling the interviewer that while he would, "of course," prefer to work with older children, he has been

fortunate to have done his student teaching with an outstanding kindergarten teacher as well as in the sixth grade. As a result, he has learned a great deal about how youngsters develop progressively through various maturational stages in the elementary school years. This, he contends, will help him to be successful with any age group in which there might happen to be an opening. The interviewer is impressed, and John receives one of the few jobs available that year in his system--a fourth grade.

John has taken the first step in becoming a successful teacher, a step almost entirely dependent not upon his "competence" in the classroom (which is normally taken for granted in the tight marketplace conditions of today), but rather upon willingness and ability to develop political skills in working with administrators, college professors, cooperating teachers, and placement interviewers.

Politics and the Teaching Career

If through the subtleties of the student teaching process, the novice has learned well that success in teaching is heavily dependent upon strategic political interaction with powerful significant others and is somewhat ambitious, he or she may well continue from then on to depend consciously and strongly upon such low profile strategic behavior to get through the first year on the job, to obtain tenure, eventually to receive a "promotional" transfer from an inner-city to a plush suburban school, and, at the precisely calculated appropriate moment to put in a bid for an administrative position or otherwise move for a

significant promotion in rank. If highly creative and professionally-motivated, an ambitious teacher may alternately depend upon political behavior when seeking aid in developing and diffusing innovative ideas for improving his or her instructional work with youngsters in the classroom. Whether their dominant career goals be occupational advancement within the organization or personal and professional fulfillment through creative instructional endeavor, these are the teachers who are openly regarded by many of their colleagues as "politicos"; and, if asked confidentially about getting ahead in the field, they will not necessarily deny this. Rather, they will frequently admit that "It all depends on who you know, not what you know in the teaching game." The name of the game to such individuals is corridor politics or some variation thereof.

If, on the other hand, the new teacher is adamant in refusing to acknowledge the necessity of some minimal political behavior while at the same time rejecting the consensual ethos of the occupation, his or her chances of initial acceptance and ultimate success in the field are likely to be limited. Such teachers are becoming extinct as the occupation grows more and more organizationally complex and demanding. The modern iconoclast, unlike the schoolmarm of the past, may, if ideologically in tune with remaining countercultural values, opt to work in a private school setting with ideographic normative expectations for teachers and students--if any are yet extant in the teacher's geographical area. In this way, he or she may avoid some of the "hassles" of public school teaching (but will be confronted by

new ones including learning to accede to increased demands from parents who equate payment of tuition with the right to a stronger voice in classroom affairs). The adamant iconoclast may, of course still be found working in a public school if clearly superior in the classroom without thereby causing waves for the organization. Occasionally, such a teacher may, without apparent penalty, even refuse to eat with colleagues in the lunchroom, to back down in the face of angry parents, to display unflagging loyalty to the principal, to refuse to "give an inch" in matters of student discipline or grades, or to join the locally preferred teachers' organization when approached. This rare teacher may be permitted to remain in the field and in fact will probably be applauded for dedicated effort 35 years or so later at a luncheon for retiring teachers. But, such an individual has little hope of ever advancing in the few ways available to teachers or of gaining much support for novel professional ideas which entail organizational modifications or heavy financial outlays. He or she will always be treated by significant others as somewhat of an oddity. Because of unwillingness to enter into the semi-illicit micro-political culture, such an employee tends to make others uncomfortable by his or her "standoffishness." Therefore, unless perceived by influential others as being exceptionally gifted in the classroom, the iconoclast is likely to be terminated prior to obtaining tenure given the "oversupply" of teachers competing for jobs today.

From the administrative point of view, the ideal teacher is still the one who does not indulge in a great deal of clearly evident political maneuvering, which is as disconcerting to most administrators as is iconoclastic refusal to play the game at all. Rather, this paragon is sufficiently astute politically so as to be able to consistently manage impressions in dealing with significant others without seeming to do so. But, it needs bearing in mind that to advance substantially in the occupation or to obtain more opportunities to try out novel ideas in the classroom some breach of the unwritten code of consensus is unavoidable as the stakes are raised and bargaining becomes increasingly intense. Therefore, the "ideal" teacher--unable or unwilling to take heavy political risks--is not likely to go far professionally. Nonetheless, he or she is viewed by management as "the salt of the earth," the kind of teacher that "administrators are lucky to have on their team," etc. They "don't cause trouble," they are not "overly aggressive," they "do the job they're paid for without complaining," they "make an effort to adjust and fit in with the group," and so on. For a person with limited ambition or talent--preferably an unemancipated woman working to "supplement her husband's income" or a lower-status man who can be satisfied with achieving middle-class station in life through an acceptable white collar occupation with limited career mobility opportunities--such a middle-road political stance is probably perfectly suitable, given the still prevailing cultural ethos of the occupation.

Thus, in sum, the political orientation an individual teacher holds is crucial to his or her future career, with three broad orientations appearing to predominate nervously at present:

a. The consciously Calculating political orientation which is almost mandatory for the highly ambitious or innovative teacher who can successfully cope emotionally with the inherent occupational conflict between self-professional needs and group consensus demands.

b. The Non-Political stance, which may work for a minority of highly capable but "uncorruptible" idealistic teachers who desire few occupational rewards other than the pleasure of dedicating their lives selflessly to youngsters.

c. The Moderately Astute political orientation, which most experienced teachers acquire sooner or later, requiring sufficient willingness and skill to get by at a satisfactory level in an occupation which until recently has tolerated mediocrity as a tradeoff for requiring an acceptance of the inevitable ambivalence between the politically real and the consensually ideal.

Conclusion

To avoid being blamed more than they already are for contributing to the "culture shock" and role strain known to be felt by most teachers upon leaving the "ivory tower" training institution for life in the "real" occupational world, teacher educators are well advised to acknowledge the growing

significance of micro-political factors in the occupation. Both coursework and clinical experiences need to be reevaluated and organized so as to explicitly communicate to idealistic novices the numerous and far-reaching ramifications of such political factors in teachers' day-to-day endeavors and the implications of micropolitics for their careers viewed as a whole. In addition, confused and guilt-ridden experienced teachers, long indoctrinated with consensus mythology while forced to operate practically in terms of covert strategic interactions in their everyday work also need to be aided in coming to terms with the political realities of their jobs; possibilities abound for such help in a variety of settings, including "assertiveness training" sessions, summer school courses dealing with teacher problems, and in-service workshops in "values clarification" and "role theory." Finally, of course, it almost goes without saying that research on the politics of teaching as a distinctive type of goal-directed interpersonal interactions may offer a wealth of opportunities for new insights about education of potentially enormous value in improving the process of teaching and learning in a troubled era.

References

1 The term "political" is employed herein in its broader "systemic-behaviorial" sense as exemplified in the writings of David Easton, A Systems Analysis of Political Life. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1965, and Erving Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. New York: Anchor Books, 1959.

2 Recent discussions bearing on the "invisible" and "consensual" character of American educational politics include: Laurence Iannaccone and Frank W. Lutz, Politics Power and Policy: The Governing of Local School Districts. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1970; Norman D. Kerr, "The School Board as an Agency of Legitimation," Sociology of Education, 38 (Fall 1964): 34-59; Michael W. Kirst, ed., State, Schools, and Politics: Research Directions. Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath and Company, 1972.

3 A rejoinder to this time-honored myth, arguing that teachers owe allegiance only to their profession, not their electors, is found in Richard Pratte, The Public School Movement: A Critical Study. New York: David McKay Company, 1973, pp. 156, 57. The issue is muddied by financial considerations which are forcing court tests of jurisdictional authority over public schools. In 1979, for instance, the California Court of Appeal ruled that since school districts are administrative agencies of the state for the local

operation of the state school system, their acts and resolutions are not subject to popular referendum.

4 The above ideas are further elaborated upon in Sanford W. Reitman, "The Limitations of Consensus As a Model of Educational Reform," Teachers College Record (February 1977): 337-43.

5 Students of values will not be surprised by such ambivalence. American society, particularly when viewed as one undergoing massive transformation, has long been afflicted with contrary systems of core values. See Nicholas Rescher, "What is Value Change? A Framework for Research," in Kurt Baier and Nicholas Rescher, eds., Values and the Future: The Impact of Technological Change and American Values. New York: The Free Press, 1969, pp. 68-109.

6 One of the better summaries of the research pertaining to thereality training offered teachers during their professional preparation remains Robert Dreeban's The Nature of Teaching: Schools and the Work of Teachers. Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foreman, 1970. Most of the research in this regard has been done by anthropologists and sociologists rather than by teacher educators.